

INLAND: Delaying freeway maintenance is risky, experts say



File Photo

Caltrans workers make emergency repairs on a crumbling cement slab on Interstate 10 in Yucaipa in June. Caltrans says the inability to keep up with preventive maintenance on Inland roadways can create bigger, and more costly, problems later.

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Robert Ashton merged into the fast lane of northbound Interstate 215 just past Central Avenue in Riverside on a recent Thursday morning. Traffic was light and there wasn't a car in front of him.

But that didn't mean he had smooth sailing.

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He had to quickly switch lanes to avoid a gnarled, bumpy section he's dodged for two years. Getting out of that

particular lane has become a part of his workday commute from eastern Riverside to Rialto.

"Sometimes I forget about it," said Ashton, 34. "Then I hear 'THWOMP!' "

For thousands of Inland drivers, dodging potholes and cracked pavement and navigating poor roads is a frustrating and costly reality of living in Southern California, where overused highways and streets are ruined by trucks and cars.

The bumps hit drivers' pocketbooks, too, according to national studies.

The situation irritates and costs Caltrans officials money, too, they said.

"Do I want roads that are in good condition? Sure," said Caltrans District 8 Director Ray Wolfe, who oversees state roads in the Inland area. "The challenge is getting the money to afford that opportunity."

With \$5 billion annually in maintenance needs on state roads and only \$2 billion available, only the worst sections can be fixed.

"Sometimes that does not happen until failure occurs," Wolfe said.

The money shortfall is setting up a scenario officials shudder to think about: State roads will deteriorate beyond repair and a major roadway will fail.

In the Inland area, drivers have glimpsed what could happen. Interstate 215 in Murrieta was closed for almost five days in February 2009 when a drainage pipe below the road collapsed, leading to widespread traffic backups on city streets as crews repaired a sinkhole that swallowed the freeway.

Highway 330 between Highland and Running Springs was closed in early 2010 and December by heavy storms that eroded sections of the roadway. Crews spent months rebuilding the route, which reopened in mid-June.

The work for both projects was done using a director's order, which comes from funds set aside for emergency repairs. As preventive maintenance goes undone, such orders are becoming more common, officials said.

"We're using director's orders to do pavement maintenance," Wolfe said, a practice that a decade ago would have been rare.

Federal officials also are worried that the nation's crumbling roads are costing the country a competitive edge in business.

Sen. Barbara Boxer lamented the state of the nation's transportation system during a recent hearing in Washington, citing a study showing the United States' infrastructure, once among the world's best, has fallen to a ranking between Spain and Chile.

"Just since 1999, we went from being No. 7 to No. 23, and our people are paying the price on roads that are deficient, bridges that are deficient," said Boxer, D-Calif. "All of this says: This is crazy."

In a separate briefing with reporters, Boxer, who heads the Senate panel that oversees transportation legislation, said 70 percent of the nation's bridges and half of the nation's roads are now substandard.

Funding fixes

In the Inland area, Caltrans officials have said they do what they can afford to do. Safety issues such as dangerous potholes are fixed as needed, but more preventive tasks such as cleaning debris from inlets on the side of the road are completed as crews have time.

More manpower would get more done, said Wolfe, the Caltrans district director. In 2010, there were 410 maintenance workers in Riverside and San Bernardino counties, down from 441 in 2000.

Over the same time, Inland drivers paid more to repair wear and tear caused by the poor roads. The cost per driver more than quadrupled, from \$136 to \$632, according to The Road Information Program, a Washington-based group backed by the insurance and construction industries and road-related trade unions that advocates more transportation spending.

Regulations also stop some maintenance projects from proceeding as quickly as officials would like. Along many Inland routes, especially those in the San Bernardino Mountains and in the Mojave Desert, Caltrans must coordinate with federal and state officials and prepare environmental reports that can take months to flow through state and federal offices.

Repairs to the 330 were slightly delayed by the mountain yellow-legged frog, an endangered resident of City Creek, which winds down a steep hillside below the road. Work rebuilding the slope along a section of the 330 had to conform to protecting the frog.

Numerous state and federal permits -- and sometimes even full environmental reports -- are required for maintenance and emergency repairs in many Inland mountains and deserts.

Culvert Conundrum

Maintenance issues in Riverside and San Bernardino counties are many -- lanes need to be repaved, bridges need to be improved -- but culvert maintenance is among the most serious problems.

On both I-215 and the 330, culverts and stormwater drainage problems caused the roadway collapses.

But to get state funding for maintenance, culvert inspection and preventive maintenance competes with other programs, said Steve Pusey, assistant director for maintenance in Caltrans District 8.

"We have approximately 7,000 lane miles," Pusey said. "With that many miles, there are a lot of culverts, and a lot of other issues, too."

Two people inspect culverts in the two-county area.

Brandi Means, one of the inspectors, said as freeways are widened and residential and commercial development increases, culverts must handle more water. Sometimes, older culverts fail.

The state's goal is to have an inventory of the culverts and their condition -- similar to the one required by the Federal Highway Administration for bridges -- so officials can spot problems before they occur.

"We're probably another couple years away from finishing the inventory," Wolfe said.

Wolfe said about 5,500 culverts in Riverside and San Bernardino counties have been inventoried so far.

"You keep putting it off one year at a time and then you have a storm," said Catalino Pining, the district's senior transportation engineer for management project management.

Path to prosperity

Even as Washington spars over future transportation funding, Southern California lawmakers said they are optimistic that Washington is getting the message about a need to fund transportation.

"Across the nation you hear a unified chorus," Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa said at a transportation summit last week. "We need to remind those members of Congress that stubborn allegiance to ideology is no virtue."

Former Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell, a longtime proponent of infrastructure investment, said breaking the logjam that's delayed a federal transportation bill for nearly two years should be the biggest priority for local officials seeking to improve Southern California freeways.

Better roads and rail systems are critical to boosting business, Rendell said, including goods produced in the state.

Almost \$1 trillion worth of goods are shipped from California annually, according to multiple economic analyses. The costs of those goods -- ranging from fruits to electronics -- are affected by the costs of transporting them on highways. Improving roads and easing congestion are vital to helping businesses recover from the economic downturn, supporters said.

"We want the jobs," Rendell said. "We want American manufacturing to be restored."

Others agreed lowering the cost of shipping goods by improving roads can help business.

Companies such as UPS are reliant on good roads to conduct business more cost-effectively, said Noel Massie, president of UPS Central California, which covers most of Southern California and the Central Valley.

Better roads will improve travel times and lower costs. UPS estimates road delays of 10 minutes or more cost the company \$125 million nationwide, Massie said.

"There is no more important thing for the government to get (its) head around than to ensure our transportation system is well maintained," he said.

Also contributing to this report: Staff writer Ben Goad, bgoad@PE.com

worst roads

Riverside and San Bernardino counties, as of 2009:

Highway 74: Between Seventh Street and Interstate 215 in Perris

Euclid Avenue: Between Walnut Avenue in Ontario and Highway 210 in Upland

Highway 74: Between Lime Street in Lake Elsinore and Sharp Road near Perris

Euclid Avenue: Between Bickmore Avenue and Merrill Avenue in Chino

Interstate 10: Between Calimesa and Ramsey Street in Banning


Interstate 215: Between Highway 60 in Moreno Valley and the 60/91/215 interchange in Riverside

Highway 60: Between Valley Way and Pacific Avenue in Rubidoux

Highway 91: Between Main Street and Interstate 15 in Corona

SOURCE: THE ROAD INFORMATION PROGRAM

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